

The Opinion Pages

THE STONE

How to Be a Stoic

By Massimo Pigliucci

February 2, 2015 3:25 am

The Stone is a forum for contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless.

In every culture we know of, whether it be secular or religious, cosmopolitan or tribal, the question of how to live is central. How should we handle life's challenges and vicissitudes? How should we conduct ourselves in the world and treat others? And the ultimate question: how do we best prepare to die?

For my part, I've recently become a Stoic. I do not mean that I have started keeping a stiff upper lip and suppressing my emotions. As much as I love the "Star Trek" character of Mr. Spock (which Gene Roddenberry actually modeled after his — mistaken — understanding of Stoicism), those are two of a number of misconceptions about what it means to be a Stoic. In reality, practicing Stoicism is not really that different from, say, practicing Buddhism (or even certain forms of modern Christianity): it is a mix of reflecting on theoretical precepts, reading inspirational texts, and engaging in meditation, mindfulness, and the like.

I'm not alone. Thousands of people, for instance, participated in the third annual Stoic Week, a worldwide philosophy event cum social science experiment organized by a team at the University of Exeter, in England. The goal of Stoic Week is twofold: on the one hand, to get people to learn about

Stoicism and how it can be relevant to their lives; on the other hand, to collect systematic data to see whether practicing Stoicism actually does make a difference to people's lives.

Stoicism was born in Hellenistic Greece, very much as a practical philosophy, one that became popular during the Roman Empire, and that vied over centuries for cultural dominance with the other Greek schools. Eventually, Christianity emerged, and actually incorporated a number of concepts and even practices of Stoicism. Even today, the famous Serenity Prayer recited at Alcoholic Anonymous meetings is an incarnation of a Stoic principle enunciated by Epictetus: "What, then, is to be done? To make the best of what is in our power, and take the rest as it naturally happens." ("Discourses")

I arrived at Stoicism, not on my way to Damascus, but through a combination of cultural happenstance and deliberate philosophical choice. First, I was raised in Rome, and I have considered Stoicism part of my cultural heritage ever since I studied ancient Greek and Roman history and philosophy in high school. This is no different, I take it, from so many people who (at the least initially) fall into Buddhism or Catholicism because they happen to be raised in a particular cultural milieu.

In addition, as a scientist and philosopher by profession, I always try to figure out more coherent ways to understand the world (science) and better choices for living my life (philosophy). I have for many years been attracted to virtue ethics — a core of Stoic philosophy — as a way to think about morality and a life worth living. I have also recently passed the half century mark, one of those arbitrary points in human life that nonetheless somehow prompt people to engage in broader reflections on who they are and what they are doing.

Lastly, Stoicism speaks directly to a lifelong preoccupation I've harbored that is present in nearly all forms of religion and philosophical practice — the

inevitability of death and how to prepare for it. The original Stoics devoted a great deal of effort and writing to what Seneca famously referred to as the ultimate test of character and principle. “We are dying every day,” he wrote to his friend Marcia in consolation for the loss of her son. Because of this confluence of factors, I decided to take a serious look at Stoicism as a comprehensive philosophy, to devote at least a year to its study and its practice.

Is Stoicism’s reputation as a useful practical philosophy justified? While the preliminary results from the Exeter experiment are tentative (more sophisticated experimental protocols and larger sample sizes would clearly be needed), they are promising. Participants in Stoic Week reported a 9 percent increase in positive emotions, an 11 percent decrease in negative emotions and a 14 percent improvement in life satisfaction after one week of practice (they also did longer term followups, which confirmed the initial results for people who kept practicing). People also seem to think that Stoicism makes them more virtuous: 56 percent of participants gave Stoic practice a high mark in that regard.

This is not entirely surprising, given that Stoicism is the philosophical root of a number of evidence-based psychological therapies, including Victor Frankl’s logotherapy and the increasingly diverse family of practices that go under the general rubric of cognitive behavioral therapy (C.B.T.).

It is worth keeping in mind that the people who elected to participate in Stoic Week are a highly self-selected sample (and, probably, so are the people who choose C.B.T. over, say, Freudian or Jungian psychoanalysis), so a cautious and a healthy degree of skepticism is certainly warranted.

Nonetheless, I think it is worth considering what it means to “be a Stoic” in the 21st century. It doesn’t involve handling a turbulent empire as Marcus Aurelius had to do, or having to deal with the dangerous madness of a Nero, with the fatal consequences that Seneca experienced. Rather, my modest but

regular practice includes a number of standard Stoic “spiritual” exercises.

I begin the day by retreating in a quiet corner of my apartment to meditate. Stoic meditation consists in rehearsing the challenges of the day ahead, thinking about which of the four cardinal virtues (courage, equanimity, self-control and wisdom) one may be called on to employ and how.

I also engage in an exercise called Hierocles’ circle, imagining myself as part of a growing circle of concern that includes my family and friends, my neighbors, my fellow citizens, humanity as a whole, all the way up to Nature itself.

I then pass to the “*premeditatio malorum*,” a type of visualization in which one imagines some sort of catastrophe happening to oneself (such as losing one’s job), and learns to see it as a “dispreferred indifferent,” meaning that it would be better if it didn’t happen, but that it would nonetheless not affect one’s worth and moral value. This one is not for everybody: novices may find this last exercise emotionally disturbing, especially if it involves visualizing one’s own death, as sometimes it does. Nonetheless, it is very similar to an analogous practice in C.B.T. meant to ally one’s fears of particular objects or events.

Finally, I pick a Stoic saying from my growing collection (saved on a spreadsheet on DropBox and available to share), read it to myself a few times and absorb it as best as I can. The whole routine takes about ten minutes or so.

Throughout the rest of the day, my Stoic practice is mostly about mindfulness, which means to remind myself that I not only I live “*hic et nunc*,” in the here and now, where I must pay attention to whatever it is I am doing, but, more importantly, that pretty much every decision I make has a moral dimension, and needs to be approached with proper care and thoughtfulness. For me this often includes how to properly and respectfully treat students and colleagues, or how to shop for food and other items in the most ethically minded way possible (there are apps for that, naturally).

Finally, my daily practice ends with an evening meditation, which consists in writing in a diary (definitely not meant for publication!) my thoughts about the day, the challenges I faced, and how I handled them. I ask myself, as Seneca put it in “On Anger”: “What bad habit have you put right today? Which fault did you take a stand against? In what respect are you better?”

Stoicism, of course, may not appeal to or work for everyone. It is a rather demanding philosophy of life, where your moral character is pretty much stipulated to be the only truly worthy thing to cultivate in life (though health, education, and even wealth are considered to be “preferred indifferents”). Then again, it does have a lot of points of contact with other philosophies, as well as religions: Buddhism, Christianity, and — I think — even modern secular movements such as **secular humanism** or **ethical culture**. There is something very appealing for me as a non religious person in the idea of an ecumenical philosophy, one that can share goals and at the least some general attitudes with other major ethical traditions across the world.

There are also challenges that remain unresolved. The original Stoicism was a comprehensive philosophy that included not just a particular view of ethics, but also a metaphysics, a take on natural science, and specific approaches to logic and epistemology (i.e., a theory of knowledge). Many of the particular notions of the ancient Stoics have ceded place to modern science and philosophy, and need to be updated.

Take, for instance, the Stoic concept of Logos, the rational principle that governs the universe. For the Stoics, this was the manifestation of a divine creative mind, a notion I certainly cannot subscribe to as a modern secular philosopher and scientist. But I am on board with the idea that the universe is organized according to rational-mathematical principles (otherwise we could not understand it scientifically), and I share the Stoic belief in universal cause and effect, which in turn has profound implications for the way Stoics look at both our place in the cosmos and our conduct of everyday life.

Given all this, I am willing to invest some time into exploring just how much one can recover of the original Stoic spirit, update it with modern knowledge, and still reasonably call it “Stoicism” (or, more properly, neo-Stoicism). If it turns out that it can’t be done, I will at least have learned much from the search.

In the end, of course, Stoicism is simply another path some people can try out in order to develop a more or less coherent view of the world, of who they are, and of how they fit in the broader scheme of things.

The need for this sort of insight seems to be universal.

Massimo Pigliucci is a professor of philosophy at the City College of New York. He edits the Scientia Salon webzine and produces the Rationally Speaking podcast. His latest book, co-edited with Maarten Boudry, is “Philosophy of Pseudoscience: Reconsidering the Demarcation Problem.”